

In January, former agriculture minister Laimdota Straujuma was confirmed as Latvia's prime minister, becoming the first woman to hold the position. Previously a political independent, she joined the governing Unity party just ahead of her confirmation and following the October 2014 parliamentary elections.

A controversial preamble to Latvia's constitution was promulgated in July 2014. It guarantees "the existence and development of the Latvian nation" and contains references to the importance of the Latvian language and Latvian culture. While it states that Latvia "respects its minorities," the preamble's critics say it blatantly favors the interests of ethnic Latvians over those of the country's ethnic minorities. The Ukraine crisis in 2014 exacerbated the existing social and political divide between Latvia's ethnic Latvians and its sizable ethnic-Russian minority.

In January, Latvia formally adopted the euro currency.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 34 / 40 (+1) [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 12 / 12

The Latvian constitution provides for a unicameral, 100-seat parliament, whose members are elected to four-year terms. The parliament elects the president, who serves up to two four-year terms. The prime minister is nominated by the president and approved by the parliament. Recent elections have generally been considered free and fair.

Andris Bērziņš, a multimillionaire former banker and a member of the Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS), was elected president in 2011. October 2014 parliamentary elections saw a victory by the ruling, conservative coalition, which is comprised of Unity, ZZS, and the nationalist National Alliance. Together the three parties took 58 percent of the vote. The Harmony Center, which represents the interests of Latvia's ethnic Russians as an alliance of the Socialist Party (LSP) and the Social Democratic Party (TSP), took 23 percent of the vote, compared to 28 percent in 2010. However, it still won more votes than any other single party, with one more seat in the legislature than second-place finisher Unity. In January 2014, Straujuma was confirmed as prime minister. Her government won confirmation in November.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 14 / 16

Latvia's political parties organize and compete freely. Latvian political candidates cannot run as independents, and those who belonged to communist or pro-Soviet organizations after 1991 may not hold public office. Harmony Center has never been invited to participate in a coalition government.

Residents who do not hold Latvian citizenship may not vote, hold public office, or work in government offices. Noncitizens may join political parties, as long as the party does not count more noncitizens than citizens as members. Approximately 14 percent of Latvia's residents are noncitizens; most are ethnic Russians, but Latvia's noncitizen population also includes many ethnic Poles, Ukrainians, and Belarusians.

Under 2013 changes to Latvia's citizenship law, Latvian nationals and their descendants who emigrated to other current EU member states due to Nazi or Soviet occupation can have dual citizenship if they can speak the Latvian language and prove that they or their ancestors lived in Latvia. Another amendment states that children of noncitizens born after August 1991 can gain Latvian citizenship if they reside in Latvia permanently and have never acquired citizenship in another state.

C. Functioning of Government: 8 / 12 (+1)

Corruption is a serious problem and exists at every level of government. Citizens have little faith that politicians will act in voters' best interests, according to 2013 research by Transparency International. According to that research, 25 percent of respondents said they had paid bribes to the police. Long-running criminal corruption proceedings against Mayor Aivars Lembergs of Ventspils involving allegations of bribery, money laundering, and tax evasion remained stalled at the year's end. However, Latvia's Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau (KNAB) has earned a reputation for independence and effectiveness. It has opened many investigations involving high-profile political and business figures. Latvia was ranked 43 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index, representing a large improvement since EU accession in 2004 and the advent of the country's anticorruption initiative.

Civil Liberties: 51 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 15 / 16

The constitution protects freedom of the press. While Latvian media outlets publicize a wide range of political views in both Latvian and Russian, government offices and courts sometimes interfere with media outlets' and reporters' work. Libel remains a criminal offense. Past attacks against journalists, including the 2010 murder of Grigorijs Nemcovs—the publisher of *Million*, a Russian-language newspaper focusing on political corruption—remain unsolved.

In July 2014, a Riga court froze assets worth €23,000 (\$30,700) belonging to Cits Medijs, publisher of the prominent current-events weekly magazine *Ir*, after Maris Spruds, an insolvency administrator, filed a civil defamation case against the publication. The asset freeze, which drew a rebuke from Straujuma, was issued before proceedings in the defamation case were opened but was canceled in November.

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea, Latvia's National Electronic Mass Media Council announced a ban on RTR Rossia, a popular Russian-language television station, on the grounds that it had broadcast "war propaganda." The ban was lifted in July.

Financial pressures have prompted changes in ownership or in senior editorial staff at numerous media outlets in recent years. Numerous media outlets have been forced to merge or dramatically cut costs. In 2013, after heavy financial losses, the Swedish holding company Modern Times Group (MTG)—which controls Latvia's two most popular television channels, Latvian Independent Television (LNT) and TV3—announced that those stations would transition to cable networks by subscription. *Bizness & Baltija*, the country's oldest Russian-language newspaper, became online-only in September 2014. The government does not restrict the internet.

Freedom of religion is generally respected; however, religious groups that have been registered with the

government for more than 10 years have certain privileges that newer groups do not, including various tax benefits, the right to own property, and permission to worship in public places. Academic freedom is generally respected.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 12 / 12

Freedoms of assembly and association are protected by law, and the government generally respects these rights in practice. However, organizers of public demonstrations must obtain permission 10 days in advance to hold events. Legislation introduced in 2013 banned the display of Soviet and Nazi symbols at public events. However, two controversial annual demonstrations, which the measure was evidently designed to discourage, went forward in 2014: an annual Waffen SS veterans' parade in March, and a demonstration commemorating the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in May. Government ministers were barred participating in either parade, and Straujuma fired Environment Minister Einars Cilinskis due to his participation in the former.

In April, ethnic Russians held a demonstration protesting the education law, which requires that 60 percent of all classes be conducted in the Latvian language. Ahead of an August visit to Latvia by German chancellor Angela Merkel, the Russian Union political party hosted a demonstration at which participants called for Western governments to cancel economic sanctions against Russia.

The government does not restrict the activities of nongovernmental organizations. Workers may establish trade unions, strike, and engage in collective bargaining.

F. Rule of Law: 12 / 16

While judicial independence is generally respected, inefficiency, politicization, and corruption continue to be problems, and citizens distrust both the police and the courts, according to recent polling by Transparency International. Lengthy pretrial detention remains a concern, and law enforcement officials have allegedly abused prisoners. Prisons continue to suffer from overcrowding, and many detainees have poor access to health care.

Roma face discrimination.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 12 / 16

Citizens and noncitizens may travel freely within the country and internationally. Latvia in recent years has implemented some reforms to improve the environment for businesses and workers, though corruption represents a major impediment to many business activities.

Women enjoy the same legal rights as men, but often face employment and wage discrimination. Domestic violence is not frequently reported, and police do not always take meaningful action when it is. Latvia is both a source and destination country for women and girls trafficked for the purpose of forced prostitution.

Same-sex marriage was banned in 2005. Members of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community face discrimination. Foreign minister Edgars Rinkēvičs came out as gay in November 2014; he

pledged to work toward building a framework for civil unions.

Income inequality in Latvia is high, and the welfare system is inadequate. A May 2013 European Commission report indicated that 40 percent of Latvia's population was at risk of social exclusion or poverty. Poor economic conditions and high unemployment have prompted many young, highly educated people to leave Latvia. While the country's 2011 census showed that Latvia lost some 13 percent of its population between 2000 and 2011, emigration has slowed somewhat in recent years.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)